

## RUTH HUFFMAN VISITS AMANDA GREEN

Amanda Green and her husband, Kevin, live on a sweet little piece of land between Kerrs Creek and Rockbridge Baths along with their two young kids, a flock of chickens, some sheep, a dog, and a WHOLE bunch of flowers. Their enterprise is called Yonderyear Farm, specializing in cut flowers for events, that they sell through a sustainable floriculture wholesale collective, as well as designing and creating arrangements and bouquets and the like for pretty much any purpose. They work pretty darn hard at it, and have been implementing permaculture practices to build their soil in a healthy way and are proud to be chemical pesticide and herbicide-free. Traditionally, young people went to college to get off the farm. But Amanda and Kevin went to college (they are both Washington and Lee alums), so that they could get back to the land and have a little farm. Neither of them studied agriculture or horticulture specifically, but the knowledge and values they picked up along the way in their schooling and travels have actually translated quite usefully into their farm life and business, and the way they see themselves as stewards of their land.

The big global flower industry is a \$35 billion dollar a year industry, projected to grow to \$50 billion within a decade or so, and, predictably, it's fraught with some really disturbing dynamics. While the Netherlands continues to dominate both the American and European flower markets, in this country much of our large supermarket and chain-florist-sourced blossoms come from Columbia and a couple other South American countries like Ecuador. Before the late 60s, most people's flowers came from regional producers, but after an American guy (surprise!)

came up with the idea to turn Columbia into a huge flower-production power zone, that all changed. In a hurry.

In a poor country that had been rife with political upheaval and guerrilla fighting, plus the booming cocaine trade, growing flowers for export sounded like an innocent sort of industry, improving the lives of the Columbian locals by providing much-needed employment. And the US Government helped things along by suspending import duties on Columbian flowers, (which was a disaster for American producers). We couldn't get enough of those \$29.99 bouquets from the supermarket, and demand went through the roof.

Buzz kill alert: like everything, this cheapness has had a major hidden cost, not just for the laborers who produce these flowers, but also for the environment. The workers, mainly women, develop repetitive stress injuries, which isn't surprising, since they are hunched over clipping blooms for sixteen hours a day and no sick leave. There have been reports of some serious sexual harassment. Children as young as nine and ten toil in the steaming greenhouses, just like their adult counterparts, stripping thorns off the roses by hand because we want our roses to be thornless. There have been studies showing that some of these workers are exposed to as many as 127 different chemicals, many of which have been banned for use in the US due to their terrible effects on people and the land. Refrigerated jets fly every day from Columbia and Ecuador to Miami, and then these flowers are trucked all over the country. The sprawling farms have depleted the groundwater and tainted it with chemicals, and, even though some of the companies attempt fair trade practices, it's totally voluntary down there, there is very little government oversight so the growers can pretty much just do whatever. And a lot of them do.

But Americans are starting to catch on, finally and each of us has a choice to make every time we purchase anything. And because people are starting to be more mindful about the products we buy and where they come from and how they are

made, the big companies are starting to feel the pressure to do better, and, happily, small farming operations are able to start up and survive and even thrive. We are finding out that supporting local food, flower, and other types of local producers really does make a difference not only in our own health, but in the health of our local economies. Sustainability isn't just a buzz word anymore. And Amanda and Kevin are totally on that train.

I went to chat with Amanda one sunny day and while we chatted, we planted seedlings in her row houses, while the birds sang and the bees hummed and, at least in this little pocket of the world, everything seemed as it should...

**Amanda:** I was born here in Rockbridge County, and we lived out in Natural Bridge. My parents had a place out in the county near the bridge itself, and when I was five we moved into town. So I did most of my growing up in Lexington. After high school I went to Washington and Lee, although that was not originally part of the plan. Dad went to VMI, then moved away and got his masters in education at William and Mary. When he came back to Lexington, he started at VMI as Assistant Sports Information Director. He's always been a sports fanatic; he loves pretty much any sport. Then he worked his way up to Public Information, then ended up working for the Board of Trustees toward the end of his time there. He still spends plenty of time at VMI, even in retirement.

**Ruth:** And your mom of course was an art teacher, one of my favorite teachers of all time, really.

**Amanda:** Aww! And yes, she taught at the Buena Vista public schools for almost forty years. She taught K-12: she always especially loved teaching the little kids.

**Ruth:** So seems like growing up you had a nice balance of athleticism and creativity in your home life. Growing up did you ever imagine you'd be doing this homesteading/flower farming?

**Amanda:** Absolutely not. But while I had a great balance at home, I feel like educationally, I wish I'd been

able to have a slightly different balance with more instruction on the VoTech side of things. Kevin and I often talk about this: our public schools are set up in a way that tracks students depending on what grades they made. I really think that I could've benefitted from being able to take some classes in VoTech instead of just the purely academic side. It took me a really long time to realize that working with my hands was what was best for me.

There were so many things that Kevin and I had to learn from scratch because we weren't brought up to learn about those things, and we were always on the academic tracks in school. So yeah, the flower farm was not even in the back of my mind in my teenage years, or even in my early twenties. I will say I always loved gardening. I grew up gardening with my grandfather a lot. They had a place on the Eastern Shore, and I loved getting my hands in the dirt. But of course I never imagined it would translate into a career. When I was little I guess I went through the typical

things that kids think they're gonna do.

**Ruth:** Like being queen? (Laughs)

**Amanda:** Yeah, being queen of my own country was on the list for awhile. (Laughs.) I also thought I might like to be a vet. And I thought about being a doctor for a time. But being a doctor is a bit similar to being an entrepreneur in that, if you don't have people in your family that are in those vocations, it's harder to have a role model and figure it out. I got to first semester in college and realized the doctor thing wasn't happening. So I went more generalist in college and was a business major. I did have a concentration in environmental studies because of my love for the earth and all things terrestrial. But I didn't really have a specific focus with my major in business, it was just something I thought might be useful. Later at W&L I found a couple professors I really enjoyed and through them took classes on International Development. I was interested in learning about the countries around the world that don't

have the economic bounty that we have here in the US, and that's what landed me in the Peace Corps. There I really did get to use my hands. I worked for a nonprofit that focused on youth development in the Kingdom of Tonga. Youth in Tonga is considered anyone who is out of school but not married, so it's a big percentage of the population. We had an organic greenhouse there to help youth develop skills for employable futures if they didn't go to college. That was kind of the launching pad, I guess, for what I'd find myself doing later.

You know it's so funny how many people join the Peace Corps thinking they're going to change the world, but really, the world changes you. I would say the majority of people I know who went found it to be an opportunity for betterment and exploration of self, not the other way around.

**Ruth:** How did you and Kevin meet?

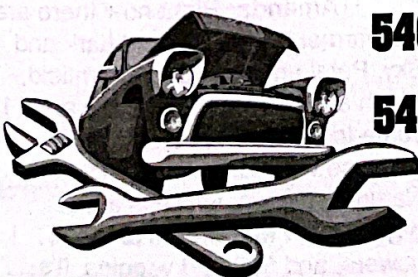
**Amanda:** We met at W&L. Kevin was much more of the liberal arts generalist. He was into >

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philosophy, anthropology and East Asian studies. All the things. He didn't really didn't know what he wanted to do either. He kind of thought about law school. But he ended up also doing a program in International Development. He went to Johns Hopkins after some time in Cambodia and Thailand, and studied development economics.

After I came back from the Peace Corps, I worked in development contracting in DC, which was working for a for-profit organization that bid on US contracts for projects around the world. I found that work to be a little bit soul-sucking. I quickly realized that wasn't what I wanted to do. I went to England and got my Masters in International Rural Development, and that's how I started to focus on agriculture. I loved what I did in the Peace Corps with the greenhouse, and this time I got to really study agricultural commodities around the world and how our global economy and food systems affect small-scale farmers.

It was amazing. Halfway through my thesis I started thinking I needed to do something with my life that wasn't going to be a desk job. Even though I had already been in the contracting world, I thought maybe there was a way for me to do field work through a subject like that. But I realized they were not going to put me on a farm. I was going to wind up behind a desk. Part of my journey was very much learning about the end product, and we had a connection with a well-known chef out in Seattle. So we moved out to Seattle so I could spend some time working as a chef for somebody who was very committed to sourcing local products. It was a great way to learn what the actual cost of food is, in that respect. By that point, Kevin and I had just gotten married, and out in Washington we had a garden and knew we wanted land at some point. But we still were not to the flower farm part of life.

**Ruth:** What made you choose flowers rather than some other type of agricultural endeavor?

**Amanda:** Well, so knowing what we learned in the academic world about agriculture in the US, we

knew what we wanted to pursue was something opposite of the way most crops in this country are grown, which is through large-scale mono-cropping. We also knew that whatever we did, we wanted to be able to offer a value-added product because that's how you can actually make money.



**Ruth:** What does "value-added" mean? I didn't take that class. (Laughs.)

**Amanda:** That means you're not just growing a crop and selling it as a wholesale product. Rather, you're taking what you grow and you're turning it into something else. For us, it's that we grow our flowers and turn them into design-work or into bouquets that we sell to consumers. So that is a way you can have your hands on all parts of the process. Another part of that too is that we have thirty acres here. So it's not some kind of giant farm. But flowers are really high density, and you can fit a LOT of flowers on minimal acreage. Even if you expand out of annuals and have more perennials and shrubs and things you can use for your arrangements. You don't need a hundred acres for soybeans or two hundred acres for corn or whatever, and you can minimize the amount of land you're managing.

And so for those reasons and more, the flowers are a great fit us. Plus, I always liked growing flowers.

Everywhere Kevin and I lived before we bought this place here in Rockbridge Baths, we always grew flowers. We just grew them for our own enjoyment, not with any specific purpose. But we always had success with it. So it seemed like a good thing to dive into. And flowers are pretty adaptable in terms of weather and climate. As long as you are a diversified operation, it's easy to pivot to growing a different variety or cultivar that's more tolerant to changes in heat or rainfall, or less susceptible to a certain type of pest that may become prevalent on your property, whatever the case may be.

**Ruth:** How do you decide what kinds of flowers you're going to grow from year to year, at least on the annual front? Do people request certain things, or are you spending time checking out industry trends, do you just browse through catalogs and order whatever looks pretty to you, or what?

**Amanda:** I really love orange, but it turns out not everybody likes it, so it can't just be all about what I want to grow personally. (Laughs.) Although I have piqued some people's interest about doing design work with oranges, so there's hope. I would say seventy percent of our revenue stream right now is through event work, and we are doing the design for those events. We do a combination of arrangements for events, which would be centerpieces and decorations; personals, which people either wear or hold, like a bridal bouquet or a boutonniere or corsage or something like that; and we also do installations, like a flower arch or something that's affixed to the side of a tree to give it some floral decoration. So we do a mix of those things. And we are part of a wholesale co-op.

**Ruth:** How is that arranged? Like how many other growers are in it?

**Amanda:** Right now there are four farms: there's us, and Lark and Sky, Petal and Pail, and Thornfield, which are all in the Buchanan area. I came to be a part of the group because we are part of Certified Naturally Grown, which is a US organization for farmers of meat, flowers, and fruit and veggies. It's

basically a grassroots version of the National Organic Program. I don't know how much you know about the NOP, but basically you pay fifty thousand dollars and somebody comes to inspect your farm once and then that's it. There's no real accountability for maintaining your standards after your certification. Plus, I mean, it's ridiculously expensive and not really accessible to small scale growers. So basically CNG has the same, if not stricter standards than the NOP, but because it's grassroots-based you have annual inspections, and you also have to do annual inspections of other farms. Suzanna, of Thornfield, came out in March to do our annual inspection and that's when we started talking about the collective. It was a great nudge for us to move into wholesale. We hadn't really thought about wholesaling before because we're not in an area of high florist density. But with the collective it's great because among the four farms, within seasonal boundaries like late March through October, basically, we have a really great diversity of

things. So florists or anyone who is a wholesale buyer can go on the collective website and browse what we have every week. With four farms, we have diversity because we're not all growing the same things, plus have collectively enough product to where we can fill good size orders.

**Ruth:** That sounds great. I mean are buyers more likely to check out online stores that they know will have lots of things available rather than having to check out inventory for each individual farm?

**Amanda:** Definitely. The platform is called Rooted Farmers and it's a platform that is used nationally by flower farmers. There are different collectives sprouting up all over the US using this platform, which the most well-known one is called River City Flower Exchange in Richmond. And because our collective is closer to Roanoke, that helps. I mean, Roanoke has a pretty big wedding and floral design market and it's definitely growing.

**Ruth:** Now, in terms of the farming start-up, one might imagine

you just buy a little piece of land, plunk some stuff in the ground and boom, you can start selling stuff. But it's not like that is it?

**Amanda:** No, not at all. You have to be patient and try different things. We definitely do have plans to expand. We bought this place and it was just a house that was in the middle of a hayfield. And it had been in hay for decades, so we knew we would have to work for years to increase the plant diversity and also increase the soil health before we could really have anything to sell. We started by putting in perennial plants, lots of different things. Not to sell, but just with the intention of bringing birds back to the property. Then our next step was getting animals to start rotating and having that on-farm fertilization. I would say after those two things, in tandem with thinking about what farming system would work best for us: that's when we started planting flowers to sell as a crop.

**Ruth:** So really, it started off just being about the health of the >



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land first, and the flower farming came second...

**Amanda:** Yeah exactly. We started with our bouquet subscription program, which is just like a CSA. Our first year we just offered one, which was a twelve week bouquet subscription.

**Ruth:** Was it pretty much just, like, your mom and her friends?

**Amanda:** (Laughs.) Yeah basically! And it's a great way to get started, just word of mouth. But it was totally insane because I said I would deliver anywhere in the 24450 zip code, so my delivery routes took about three hours. It's a big county! But when you're starting out and you have a product that you believe in, the hustle is part of it, you know. And we did some sales in Bath County. Our friends over there have a market every Friday called Foodlore and we sold there. It's great because it's a presale market, so people go onto the website and see the menu of what's available for the week and pre-purchase. So that's different than a traditional farmers' market because

we already know what we've sold. And especially with flowers, it's hard because if you go down to a farmers' market and don't sell everything, you can't just take it home and re-purpose it. Cut flowers have a super finite life span. It probably works well if you're in a more urban area with more customer flow, but we have not found that it's a great revenue stream for us in our small, more rural area. And another thing about this is, except the few repeat customers and occasional restaurant order or the special events, and then the wholesale co-op, selling at farmers' markets doesn't really go that great because so many people here just have their own little flower gardens already. So it's not really a need that everybody is clamoring for. But even though flowers aren't a basic need, I mean they're not a consumable, there's something to be said for having something you can look at that makes you feel good without the emotional cost like, say, scrolling through Instagram or something. (Laughs.)

**Ruth:** Sometimes it's more

about you finding a market than the market finding you. We were talking about your studies in international agriculture and the global economy and all this, and I was surprised a few years back, as I think most people were, to discover that so much of the cut flower industry for US is based in Columbia. It seems crazy that it would be considered cheaper/better to import cut flowers from such a distance in refrigerated containers than it would to source local flowers. But here we are.

**Amanda:** I think that across the board, our economy has gotten used to a false price for most crops and commodities. We've gotten really used to getting things cheaply. The global flower industry is a huge business and the US is the number one consumer of cut flowers of all the countries in the world. The vast majority of flowers that are used in the industry come from Ecuador and Columbia. But in those places they are grown on a massive scale and they use tons of chemical pesticides and herbicides, many of which are



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illegal to use in the US. So that cuts down the cost of care per plant. You can really pack a lot of flowers in and mono-crop it, rather than having crop diversity to create checks and balances on some of those diseases that can run rampant if you're only growing one certain type of flower.

**Ruth:** Cool. So basically it's considered fine to poison other people's countries in order to feed our demand for flowers? I'm sure working conditions are also pretty bleak...

**Amanda:** Oh yeah, we are talking about people having to wear the hazmat suits because of the chemicals and having to work sixteen hour days for low wages, and there are also child labor concerns.

**Ruth:** I've definitely noticed that when you buy a rose from Walmart, say, it doesn't smell even remotely rose-like.

**Amanda:** For sure, you definitely don't want to be putting those flowers in your face. Chemicals notwithstanding, the flower breeding in the last twenty to thirty years has been done in such a way that flowers

are bred for that necessary transportability. It turns out that when flowers emit a pleasant scent, that actually shortens the life of the flower because it's putting out a scent to attract pollinators. And so when breeders can breed scent out of a flower, it doesn't use its energy for emitting that nice smell so it'll last longer after cutting.

**Ruth:** This is another classic example of people ruining something nice for money...

**Amanda:** (Laughs.) Yeah and so that's what you're getting when you get a grocery store bloom. You're getting something that is weeks and weeks old, sprayed with tons of chemicals and is not going to smell anything like the original version of that flower. So our competitive advantage is offering something that is safe environmentally and safe for your family. My kids are always coming out and touching our flowers, smelling them, sometimes eating them (laughs) and so it's safe for our family and safe for anybody we have working here as well. But we're also

offering varieties that florists can't get from the big global producers because they can't be transported thousands of miles by refrigerated jet. Our flowers have scent and are very seasonal. They might not have a three week vase life but that's natural.

**Ruth:** Even without all that, I'm impressed by how you've managed to maximize the longevity of your blooms. Like you were telling me about being able to refrigerate those peony buds and keep them for later until you need the blooms for your arrangements.

**Amanda:** Yeah, it's amazing! We harvested some peonies because they came so early this year, and I needed them for a May 20th wedding. I cut them first of May, dry packed them and then when I was ready to use them I cut the ends off, stuck them in water and they were ready to go. So peonies are a great investment for a cut flower business.

**Ruth:** So market-wise, you're obviously not set up to be in competition with the giant growers, but seems like you've found a >



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good niche market for people who want local and sustainable and pollinator friendly and all that good stuff. It's great that those values have become trendy because it means that you can grow a product you actually feel good about and still make it work business-wise.

**Amanda:** I hope it's here to stay, and I think it is. I also think there's a pride for things that are made in America and I think that needs to translate into things that are grown in America. We use flowers for so many occasions in the United States. It should be a source of pride for us to get our flowers from growers right here in our own country.

**Ruth:** Yeah, and flowers are supposed to be a feel-good sort of product. But it's hard to feel good knowing that with that \$25.99 supermarket bouquet you're subsidizing big corporations and all kinds of human rights and environmental abuses in poorer countries, all the while perpetuating a system that has often squeezed out small growers in our own country.

**Amanda:** Right, and then they become just another disposable product, instead of something that you actually enjoy and appreciate. We absolutely love what we do here. My kids are really happy living here on our farm. And the way Kevin and I have approached our business is that if it wasn't working out and we needed to cut it tomorrow, all of the investments we've made in terms of equipment and buildings and tools, those are all things we would want for our homesteading lifestyle anyway. So I think we're headed in the right direction where it would work for our family even if it weren't a business. We've got great garden space, and we've been building soil and planting trees and all that good stuff. That's the main point: we want a place where our kids can grow up appreciating where food comes from and how things are grown and the way that plants and animals interact in a way that is beneficial to the world. That's kind of the most important part for us. Of course in the summer on the weekends, we are looking out here

and there, and there are a million things to do and it can be hard to stay present.

**Ruth:** Farming isn't for lazy folks, that's for sure. I remember seeing illustrations in these children's books that showed farmers just lolling around in the hay mow, chewing on a piece of straw. But that... ain't it.

**Amanda:** (Laughs) No that isn't how it goes. I am always working here on the farm, and Kevin has a full time job plus does tons of stuff here. And I really do want to make sure I give a big shout out to Kevin. We built our farm on his full time off-farm job. He does amazing nonprofit work for the environment in the knowledge economy, but would really like to spend more time working outdoors. I'm so fortunate to be able to have the flexibility to grow the flower business and pursue our family farm lifestyle, and none of it would be possible without him and everything he does to support our family. Hopefully one day we're both able to spend our days outside in the dirt. That's the dream, right?

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